

# HerLife HerHealth



PRIMARY CARE  
WOMEN'S HEALTH FORUM

## Talking to an older woman about her body

Tips for your patients from The Eve Appeal on how to talk to an older woman about her gynaecological health.



For more resources visit  
[www.pcwhf.co.uk/HLHH](http://www.pcwhf.co.uk/HLHH)

## Talking to an older woman about her body

### 1 Older women have sex too

This can affect their gynae health – HPV is the virus which, if left untreated, is a risk factor in the development of some cancers, including cervical, vulval and vaginal cancer. It's transmitted through intimate contact and can affect people of all ages. We also know that STIs such as chlamydia can upset the vagina's pH balance. If left untreated, this can lead to more serious gynae infections such as pelvic inflammatory disease.

### 2 Play the 'Name the 5 Gynae Cancers' game

There are FIVE gynaecological cancers and they are separate diseases with different risk factors and symptoms. Ask the women in your life if they can name them, and this will almost certainly spark a conversation about gynae anatomy, because the chances are, the person you ask won't be able to list all five.

**If in doubt, remember this: vulva is outside and vagina is inside.**

**It's got the word 'in' in it. VagINa!**

Everyone needs to know about the gynaecological cancers, whether they have any gynae anatomy, or they love someone who does. (The answers are womb, ovarian, cervical, vulval and vaginal.)

IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT TO EDUCATE WOMEN OF ALL AGES ABOUT THEIR GYNAE HEALTH AND HELP THEM BE CONFIDENT ABOUT SPOTTING SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

### 3 There is no such thing as a 'normal' post-menopause period

Once a woman has gone through the menopause, she cannot menstruate, i.e. have a period. Ask Eve hear things such as: "I am 58, went through the menopause a few years ago but had a period last month". The average age for a woman to go through a natural menopause in the UK is 51, and someone is post-menopause once they haven't had a period for at least 12 months. There are many benign (non-cancer) reasons why a woman may have a vaginal bleed after the menopause, but the fact is that abnormal vaginal bleeding is also a key sign of womb, cervical and vaginal cancers. If anyone you know who is post-menopausal mentions that they have been bleeding, direct them to our Ask Eve service or suggest they visit their GP to be on the safe side.

### 4 Toilet talk

For some reason, we seem to be a lot better at talking bowels than gynae. This is great news when it comes to knowing about ovarian cancer. Sounds strange? Well, ovarian cancer is the 'odd one out'; its symptoms are often confused with things such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). The most common symptoms are:

- persistent abdominal bloating and/or pain
- a change in bowel habits
- needing to wee more frequently.

It's very rare to suddenly develop IBS once you're over 25-30, but ovarian cancer is most common in women over 60. If your mum/grandma/aunt/older friend complains of any of these symptoms, but investigations for stomach/bowel problems aren't providing any answers, it's worth suggesting that they go back to the GP and discuss a gynae pathway.

## Talking to an older woman about her body

EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT THE GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS, WHETHER THEY HAVE ANY GYNAE ANATOMY, OR THEY LOVE SOMEONE WHO DOES

### 5 A clear cervical screening test (smear) isn't a clean bill of gynae health

Cervical screening tests stop at 64 in the UK, unless a person's last test wasn't clear and then further check-ups will take place. There's often confusion over what a cervical screening test actually does. Cervical screening tests check for abnormal cervical cells, that if left untreated, could potentially develop into cervical cancer. It is not a cancer test, nor is it a test for anything to do with the womb, ovaries, vagina or vulva. If someone you know is over 65, their final cervical screening was clear, but they are experiencing some potential gynae cancer symptoms, please suggest they visit their doctor, or at least tell them that cervical screening is just that – cervical screening, not a gynae cancer test.

### 6 Ask about your family medical history

Older relatives are highly likely to be able to answer questions about diseases that run in the family, what other older relatives have died from and so on. It's not a fun conversation, but it really is important to know what medical conditions (if any) run in your family. In terms of gynae cancers, ovarian and womb have hereditary links. Around 5% of womb cancers are caused by a genetic condition called Lynch Syndrome and around 15-20% of ovarian cancers are due to the BRCA gene mutation. The chances are your grandmother won't know about Lynch or BRCA, but she WILL know whether or not her mother had ovarian or womb cancer.

### 7 Nobody knows everything

We can always learn something from someone else. Our mums, grandmothers, aunts, and older friends were all our age once, and could well have had the same concern or health issue that you are going through. Try talking to them and see what happens.♀

**With thanks to The Eve Appeal.  
Go to [www.eveappeal.org.uk](http://www.eveappeal.org.uk)  
for more information on gynae  
cancers for both healthcare  
professionals and patients.**